Opportunities for Alignment:
The Search for Spirituality within the Curriculum

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The story is told of the Buddhist who approaches the hot dog cart in Central Park and says to the vendor "make me one with everything." Of course the joke is that upon reaching that state where you are *one with everything* it is understood that you will be aligned with the world and you will be at peace. For many this state of alignment is the essence of what we call spirituality.

The Power of Alignment

Martin Buber in *I and Thou* (1970) makes the observation that "One cannot instruct in the pure present. . . but in the pure past one can live. . ." (p. 85). When we stop and think about it, much of what teachers do in school is grounded in the past because teachers work in service to an institution. Buber goes on to observe that the

> served It of institutions is a golem (a cloud without a soul) and the served I of feelings is a fluttering soul-bird. Neither knows the human being; one only knows the instance and the other only knows the "object." Neither knows person or community. Neither knows the present: these, however modern, know only the rigid past, that which is finished, while those, however persistent, know only the fleeting moment, that which is not yet. Neither has access to actual life. Institutions yield no public life, feelings, no personal life. (pp. 93-94)

Reflecting on the observations offered by Buber, we can understand the negative power of separation of the parts and the positive power of unification.

In *Freedom From The Known* Krishnamurti (1969) in a discussion on thoughts and actions instructs the reader that "we have separated ideas from actions because ideas are always of the past and action is always the present—that is, living is always the present. We are afraid of living and therefore the past, as ideas, has become so important to us" (p. 100). We learn that the human spirit, so vital in the process of nurturing the development of the individual is more likely to be stifled than it is to

be freed when the call to act takes precedence over the syntheses of both thoughts and actions. It appears that teachers, students, and even parents have accepted a course of action that may indeed erode the human spirit as community after community has accepted high-stakes testing and the *No Child Left Behind* legislation as foundations of contemporary educational plan.

Although there is a certain sense of efficiency and even charity associated with these foundations the fact remains that the charge is to act and not to think; we are told to do and not to reflect, and we are directed to respond to what some see as science and to stifle what others understand to be the human spirit. I think many of us are certain that this separation of thoughts and actions has resulted in the creation of a spiritual void in the enterprise of public education in American.

"In order to live a meaningful existence — in order to build, to learn, to educate, to heal—we must understand the goal of existence, the theme of life. Otherwise, how can we know if what we are doing is contributing to the progress of the world . . . ?" (Aaron, 1997. p. 13). The questions embedded in this observation by Rabbi David Aaron introduce a study of Kabbalah. They also speak to those of us who design and evaluate curriculum and those of us who teach. Understanding that existence requires an examination of the spirit has driven us to inquire, to think, to build, to love, to hate, and to learn. In the literature of the Kabbalah there is a direct connection linking the human spirit with the soul. The rabbi instructs us to understand our soul as a person giving mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. He explains that the "rescuer gives his breath, a part of himself, to the person who lies there lifeless" (p. 86). He challenges us make the connection between this action and the passing from source to subject of *the illumination of consciousness*. . . the soul or what he calls the *inner you* (p. 86). For me it is clear that those of us concerned with curriculum and instruction would do well to consider this teaching as we contemplate the potential of the work we do. We may achieve better alignment with our calling if we understand that the purpose of Kabbalah is to repair the world as one repairs a broken vessel.

In an general sense Sullivan's concept of *form follows function* reflects the essence of this alignment (1918/1947). Very simply put Sullivan explains that when one views a building designed true to this principle, conflict is reduced and appreciation is enhanced. He calls this result *organic* (p. 47). He goes on to make the point that thinking man is naturally disposed to align with the *continuity of nature* within all people (p. 57). Later, he charges the architects as follows: "Ideal thought and effective action should so compose the vital substance of our works..." As professionals focused on curriculum design, implementation, and evaluation we have much to learn from Sullivan for he can teach us that the center of our design is ultimately connected with the *natural continuity* of the lives of those whose work and learning we facilitate.

In an effort to crystalize what I see as the essence of the spiritual dimension of curriculum, I believe we need to examine the concepts of alignment and unity as the primary forces in the dynamic experience Leland Jacobs has referred to as the

actualized curriculum —the experience that teachers and students tend to name as the curriculum (1967). It is important that it be understood that negative powers of separation result when policies and practices only align because one party becomes the *object* of the coercive power of the institution. An example of this is found in the relationship connecting most teachers and students where the quality of their relationship is monitored and measured using high-stakes testing (Buber, 1970; Krishnamurti, 1969). It is also important to understand that under oppressive conditions teachers and students will develop relationships rich in spiritual potential.

Those of us whose work is focused on the three primary curriculum processes (curriculum development, curriculum implementation, and curriculum evaluation) generally share a commitment to, and an appreciation for, efforts directed at improving the human condition. We tend to share a common belief that our work should be "contributing to the progress of the world" (Aaron, 1997, p. 13), and recognize the unifying power of Sullivan's dictum *form follows function* (1918/1947). I believe that as curriculum workers we have the opportunity to facilitate and enhance the spiritual dimensions of the curriculum if we can facilitate liberating alignments between instructional forces and the lives of those who teach and learn. As a person grounded in curriculum theory, I view spirituality as that energizing dimension of the human experience—that vital source of liberating energy that frees the imagination and releases the passion associated with both the teaching and learning processes. Central to this release is an alignment of purposes expressed in curriculum as policy, design, implementation, and evaluation. The greater the alignment of these purposes the more powerful the synergy of resulting forces and the greater the opportunity to raise the curriculum from the mundane to the spiritual.

Reflecting back on the question of the power of alignment it is clear that we will not find spirituality in independent institutions as these institutions are not capable of feeling, nor will we find it in disconnected individuals for these individuals know only the moment and, as such, they have no contextual base or sense of possibility (Buber, 1970). The spiritual connection we seek will be found only when the individual and the institution come together in ways that connect thoughts and actions in the present. (Krishnamurti, 1969). These connections can become possible when the design and implementation of curriculum achieve an *organic* state of unification that results in a natural continuity of the lives of all parties. (Aaron, 1997; Sullivan, 1918 / 1947).

Alignment: Unification as a Spiritual Force

An example of the power of alignment, the positive power of unification (Buber, 1970), can be seen in the Swan County High School Arts Program described in Tom Barone's *Touching Eternity: The Enduring Outcomes of Teaching* (2001). This compelling case study of the evolution of an arts program created by Don Forrister, the only art teacher at Swan County High School, a small school located in Bryson City, in the western Appalachian mountains of North Carolina. Barone engages the

reader in his analysis of the case. In particular, he examines the passions, intentions, and actions of the program's conceptualizer and the passions, insights, and outcomes as he engages many of the students who give life to the program. In this discussion the focus will be on the case reported in *Touching Eternity* as it relates to questions of nurturing or stifling spiritual dimensions of the curriculum.

Don Forrister, believed that the intellectual and emotional growth of students was the fundamental aim of art education and that preparing students for an occupation in the arts and crafts could result in the development of appreciation for, and devotion to, the artistic process. The program he created was an alignment of utility and aesthetics. His efforts were evidence of his hard work and dedication, as well as his talent, caring, and dedication to his students (Barone, 2001, p. 30-2). Should you happen to be in Swan County, North Carolina, and come across a piece of folk art in a local craft shop you might appreciate the product of his work.

As we examine Barone's account of the development of the program where local artisans have been trained, we sense the unity of passion and purpose in the setting he richly describes; we appreciate the fact that the components of the curriculum are aligned so as to facilitate a smooth flow of energy between the teacher and his students. We note the three basic elements of the program: teacher, students, and their passion for the arts, while at the same time noting that the art product is not nearly as important as is student growth. Finally, we note the interaction between teacher and students and sense the power within each. The natural coming together of collective forces result in a process of unification connecting teachers, students, school, and community. The result of this synergy is a spiritual force greater than the sum of its parts.

A careful reading of *Touching Eternity* (Barone, 2001) takes us beyond the curriculum. Through the words of students we learn of the power of the teacher and through a series of probing questions we are forced to reflect on what the teacher does and how his actions release human potential. We learn that Don Forrister, curriculum developer and deliverer understood the powerful relationships linking utility with aesthetics, passionate feelings with practical ends, and self-esteem with cultural identity. We also learn that Don Forrister, teacher, artist, and craftsman, sought students for this program who shared fundamental dispositions towards the arts. And, finally we come to know Don Forrister as a teacher who cared deeply about his students and his work. Ultimately, we see that what he constructed resulted in an experience defined more by spiritual connections than by physical form.

The success of Forrister's program eventually proved irresistible to Swan County and it shifted from an elective to a required program. Now serving a much broader spectrum of students, the program suffered a death of spirit often associated with popularization and institutionalization. Unlike their earlier counterparts these new students were:

> ...both more and less worldly than previous ones—more materialistic, less observant of the world at their sides. Their rebelliousness was of a kind unfamiliar to Don. The newer form of rebellion was a sullen rejection of all but the MTV culture. For

> Don, it was a challenge to light fires in the hearts of these strange new creatures, many of whom had been un-willingly herded into the vicinity of the arts and crafts. And, so the Arts I classes had became mere simulacra of the old, while Don taught fewer and fewer upper-level courses. (Barone, 2001. p. 121)

Not surprisingly, this embrace proved fatal as only the form of the curriculum remained. Those who appreciated the quality program for its surface results failed to comprehend the essence of its function. Barone reports that changes in conditions across the board encroached on the work of teachers throughout Swan County. Among the forces working in opposition to the initial program were high stakes testing and the resulting dampening of the spirit of the teachers. These changes in climate results in an *official* expansion of the program making it a requirement for all students in the County and different assignments for teachers. For example, Forrister now taught Art I rather than advanced classes and sensing a waning spiritual connection considered leaving teaching.

Towards Curriculum Alignment

The enterprise of education in general and the operation of schools in particular often present teachers and students with contradictions. When schools were close to the community, that is, when schools were operated by the specific local community they served, there were fewer contradictions facing those working in local educational endeavor, but there were contradictions none the less. In order to survive in an environment fractured by conflict, teachers and students entered into a state James Macdonald defined as a *false consciousness*. (1995 / 1975, p. 120) that greatly diminishes the potential of each. Macdonald observes that these contradictions arise "...when the form and quality of the work, power, and language creates conflicts between everyday living interests of those experiencing the activity, and other explicit or implicit external agencies imposing school activity in the service of their own interests" (p. 120). In recent years high stakes testing and state and national intrusions into the local operation of schools and school systems have caused many to rationalize curriculum decisions by operating with a sense of *false consciousness*. We see how this phenomena unfolds in the story of the Swan County Arts Program. Initially, Don Forrister created a program I describe as intimate. The close relationship linking teacher with students was facilitated by the development of a curriculum aligned with local expectations and policies leaving the opportunity of the development of a *process of social construction* (Goodson, 1994, p. 16). As a result of a design allowing for close teacher student relationships, student participation in national competitions (where significant success was achieved), and collaboration with local craft merchants the program earned a reputation for excellence and was deemed appropriate by local authorities. The result was a curriculum secured by local support, protected by local policies, and structured to fit into the overall pattern of local operations. These structural realities, by design, provided a seamless alignment

between the curriculum and instruction. By responding in the affirmative to local policies, such as the mandate that vocational education outcomes be related to vocational education (craft work was deemed to be a local vocation), the curriculum designer was able to smooth the way for opportunities for the liberation of spirits in an unchallenged setting.

But, when the larger system institutionalized the program those involved were suddenly restricted by external performance standards. The idea that the system *celebrated* the success of the program through the process of institutionalization provides an example of operating with a sense of *false consciousness*. The form of the program appeared to remain the same, the function of the program became the delivery of an institutionalized experience argued to be identical to the original. However, this functional shift resulted in a program no longer grounded in aesthetic inquiry and personal growth central to the original design; rather, it was reduced to a schedule of classes lacking the personal and life giving qualities central to the original. Absent was the intimacy so vital to the original program, and in its place was a language set that attracted new and different students with different motivations. Those who believed that the program now lived on to serve even more students were victims of a *false consciousness* as the second generation program provided a different set of conditions leading to the creation of a new and different social construction.

Clearly, if the goal of the curriculum is to assist in aligning the programs with policies and cultures so as to free the teacher and liberate the students, attention must be given to creating a clear and honest understanding of what the intention of the curriculum is rather than the nurturing of a *false consciousness*. Further, the curriculum designer must respond to the challenge of providing the teacher and students with opportunities for the creation of appropriate social constructions at the level of the actualized curriculum knowing all the while that ultimately the design will ultimately be turned over to other who will give it life and in so doing they will give it form (Fain, 2004).

The Search for the Spirituality within the Curriculum

The relationship between teacher and student can be mechanical. Teachers who accept the curriculum as a script and who expect their students to act in predetermined roles may develop working relationships that yield mastery of predetermined goals and objectives. However, teachers who seek to open up the potential associated with the spiritual in their interactions with students find little satisfaction in simply meeting performance standards set by others. Rather, they accept the curriculum as an opportunity for giving breath to an otherwise lifeless set of intentions. In the case of the Swan County arts program we have an example where the design responded to standards grounded in the context of the institution but where the true power of the program was generated by the catalatic relationships initiated by teacher actions. The result of these actions was a unification of teacher, student, and aesthetic

product facilitated by spiritual alignment. The primary forces at work in this equation were generated by the positive power of unification. Through the development of strong personal relationships teachers and students worked together to align their thoughts regarding the aesthetic with their creative actions. Among the results of this collaborative was the liberation of the spirit of both teacher and students adding greatly to the life quality of the relationship and the educative experience directed at doing something to improve the world.

The search for the spirituality within the curriculum becomes a search for relationships. As long as the curriculum is dominated by institutional policy focused on predetermined performance objectives it is unlikely that the potential of the spiritual will be realized. Teachers and students blocked from establishing intimate personal learning relationships are denied the opportunity to develop the levels of trust and daring necessary to move the curriculum up from the mundane to the positively charged spiritual levels reflected in Don Forrister's program. The designer can play a major role in creating a curriculum that will become enriched by rising to the spiritual level by aligning the formal curriculum with the local landscape so as to lay the foundation for the development of a state of natural continuity between the parts and the players. However, given the current climate I am forced to conclude that today most school systems are more inclined to facilitate teachers who comply than they are to encourage teachers who are committed to work that is intended to raise the curriculum to the spiritual level.

A Reflective Thought

The Buddhist who ask the hot dog vender to "make me one with everything" received his hot dog but remained standing next to the vender. "What do you want now?" asked the vender. "I am waiting for the change," replied the Buddhist. "Ah" said the vender, "the change will take time."

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